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## CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND LOCAL SOCIETIES<sup>1</sup>

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A friend once remarked that the library of the Wisconsin Historical Society was an "historian's heaven." If the intention was to describe it as a very delightful place for the historian to work in, one must give his unconditional approval. But if the word "heaven" herein was clothed with its customary meaning of a place or condition altogether satisfying, the verdict must be reversed.

One does not require much experience with even so magnificent and relatively complete a collection as the one which is housed in the State Historical Library to convince himself that history cannot be fully written from existing collections. This is especially true of one who conceives of history as I conceive of the history of Wisconsin—as the story of civilization-building in this commonwealth down to practically our own day. It would be quite possible, no doubt, to write the history of the French régime, the history of the British régime, and numerous episodes of later history without leaving Madison. But when we come to the period of American pioneering in Wisconsin, to the development of our far-famed agricultural and dairy interest, our industries great and small, and our social history based on the blending of several strong race elements, each possessed of its distinctive culture, the case is altogether different.

Thanks to the statesmanlike planning of our predecessors and the liberal support of state legislatures, the library already contains vast stores of documents, books, pamphlets, maps, and manuscripts illustrating phases of the complex historical process that has made Wisconsin what she is. But for a true and adequate interpretation of each one of

<sup>1</sup> Notes for an address delivered at the meeting of the Waukesha County Historical Society, North Prairie, Sept. 18, 1920.

the major lines of development we shall require an indefinite expansion of existing sources.

#### NEED OF LOCAL STUDIES

Without attempting even to suggest the wide range of material required for the definitive treatment of the history of agriculture in Wisconsin, or the history of lumbering, or textiles manufactures, or iron manufactures, or education, or science, or religion, or morals, or the fine arts, or music—all of which, and a hundred others, make the warp that unites with the woof of our complex human nature to produce the fabric of civilization in this state—it may suffice to point out that a prerequisite of such a complete history is a considerable group of local studies of a very intensive character.

The geologist, intent on understanding the formation of the earth's crust in a given region, does not content himself with traveling over the region or with reading descriptions of surface conformations in various parts. Such a superficial view would tell him something, but not enough. In addition he wants the data that can be supplied only by a number of minute investigations into the character of the crust at different points. So he goes to places where there are borings for salt or for oil, or excavations for bridge piers; where the flood waters have eroded deep trenches, exposing the strata to a considerable depth; where the action of glaciers has cut down sections of hills, leaving steep cliffs exposed; where the ocean tides or the water and the ice of inland lakes have written giant pages on crag and headland for the scientific student to read. After a sufficient number of such intensive studies he co-ordinates his data into an orderly account and interpretation of the region.

The historian may well take to heart the lesson which scientific research, in so many directions, enforces and

reiterates. It has been charged against history that it is not firmly enough attached to reality, and in a certain sense the charge is true. Too many historical writers have been content to employ merely accessible material, shaping their stories to fit the data instead of finding the data that would enable them to tell their stories as they ought ideally to be told.

If there is excuse for such deficiencies in the fact that the resources of private workers are often inadequate to the requirements of a rigorous historical method, such an excuse cannot be admitted in the case of work in which we have the support of the state and the co-operation of all historical elements and organizations of the state. Like the State Geological Survey, which was so brilliantly conceived and carried out by scientists like Chamberlin, Lapham, Strong, Irving, and others, the "Historical Survey" of Wisconsin must be as scientific as the nature of historical research permits. And one of the obviously scientific methods of assembling concrete data to serve the purposes of interpretation is to go to typical localities and study their history with the minuteness that becomes possible only when—to use a figure from science—the object you are studying is small enough to enable you to use the microscope.

Take, for illustration, the history of an organized "town," the civic society comprised in a surveyor's "township." Within certain limits the life of such a town is typical of the life of the commonwealth, or even of the nation. The men and women who made homes in its river valleys, prairies, or "oak openings" are likely to be genuine "specimens" from the universal social amalgam; the farms, mills, workshops, churches, schools, and stores would be typical of such institutions in a thousand American neighborhoods. And if this is true in the pioneer stage it is not less true in later stages, so that the conditions of change as worked out on

the local plane will be applicable to more general history as well.

Such local communities differ from one another, due to a considerable range and variety of economic and social influences. But, if a number of them taken indifferently from the several counties and sections of the state were studied intensively, the resulting material would serve to illuminate the entire course of Wisconsin history. How, then, shall we proceed in the study of a town?

#### A METHOD FOR LOCAL HISTORY STUDY

After mastering the topography of the area, and its physical relations, which determine or influence the community's economic and commercial history, the next step is to acquire some real knowledge of the people who settled the town. This can be done by the use of various sources. One (and the most obvious, which also happens to be the least satisfactory) is to rely wholly on the statement of some aged person whose memory is supposed to reach to the social beginnings in that neighborhood. Another method is to consult town records, school records, church records, lodge records, and various local mercantile records as well as local newspapers, if there were any, for information about the first settlers, dates of their arrival, etc. This method is a good one but so laborious that few would have the time or the patience to employ it exclusively. It is a desirable collateral method.

A method which is being fostered by the State Historical Society is one which begins with a township plat showing all the land grants, with names of private grantees, and dates of grants. The making of such plats is not a single or simple process, but involves several subsidiary processes as follows: First, a transfer to the township map, copied from the surveyor's map, of the data preserved in the tract books of the United States Land Office; second, the transfer to the map of similar data from the tract books of the State

Land Office; third, transfer to the margins of the resulting plat of data from the surveyor's notebook descriptive of quality of land, kinds of timber, trails, etc., seen by him in making the original survey.

As a starting point for the study of population this plat of original private grantees of the land has several advantages. It fixes two points concerning every land purchaser who was also a settler: the place of his settlement in the township, and the *date* of his purchase. It does not fix the date of settlement, though that is approximated in most cases.

In the work of securing such plats we think the State Historical Society can function with advantage. All of the work of preparing the originals, except making the township map and transferring the data from the United States Land Office tract books to the map, is performed by our force. When completed, the original plat is photostated, and thereafter reproductions can be furnished at a merely nominal price, whereas if an individual were preparing a plat, the expense in money and time would be considerable.

However, the plat of original grantees of the land is not our final objective. The heart of our plan for the *Wisconsin Domesday Book* has been expressed in the words: "The opening of every farm in the American wilderness is an original creative process significant enough to deserve a line in the general history of civilization." It is the "makers of the farms" we wish to identify. Here local studies are required, as I have shown in my article on the *Wisconsin Domesday Book*.<sup>2</sup>

After identifying the actual settlers and locating them on definite subdivisions of numbered sections of land, there remain two preliminary inquiries both of which must perforce be carried on locally: (a) The physical character of the land as respects soil, conformation, ease of cultivation, and opportunity to communicate with markets. (b) The

<sup>2</sup> *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, IV, 1, Sept. 1920.

settlers, their social and geographical origins, training, experience, special intellectual, social, or occupational aptitudes, and outstanding ambitions—with any other data about them that may be procurable.

#### DATA ABOUT THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

In the quest for information on the first head, the notes of the surveyors, inscribed on the margin of the plat, will serve as a starting point. And the geological surveys of the state will be a supplementary resource. Still, a minute familiarity with the township from actual observation of all its farms, or at least of typical farming areas, is necessary to a successful study of the agricultural and social history of the town.

A good deal of help can be derived from the census takers' descriptions of farms, which reveal the relation of cultivated to uncultivated and woodland, also the amounts per acre of the several crops raised. Still, this yields only more or less definite inferences, and inferences are not the same as facts.

The census schedules also make a starting point in the study of social origins. They list the inhabitants by name, and give age, occupation, and state or country of nativity. Thus we know, from the census of 1860, that Isaac A. Sabin, twenty-five years of age, was a school-teacher and was born in New York. Further entries show us that his wife also was a New Yorker and that they had a daughter one year old who was born in Wisconsin. We want to know more about this school-teacher's origin, whether or not he was a New Englander and, if so, what formal training he had and at what schools. We want evidence concerning his experience as a teacher, his character and influence as a man in the communities he served. Such knowledge local research alone will yield. Pursuing it, we find that he was probably of Connecticut parentage, that he was well-educated—far beyond the average district school-teacher—that he was a

man of strong character and personality which he impressed upon his pupils. Thus, he was a genuine force in the social development of the neighborhood in which he taught a pioneer school in a rude log schoolhouse.

#### CO-OPERATIVE EFFORT

If local societies will set themselves systematically to the problem of garnering such material for the social history of their communities, they will perform invaluable service and will make possible the intensive local studies of which we stand in need. The State Historical Society can supply basic helps for carrying out such programs in the way of census schedule transcripts for the different towns or counties, and other data collected at its library. To do this on a large scale would call for a considerable enlargement of its clerical force, but such enlargement is contemplated in the plans for utilizing the Burrows Fund income in preparing the *Domesday Book*. The county records and town records, the school records and church records, the cemetery records, and a variety of commercial records will be available locally as special documentary resources.

If we conceive the proposed "social-origins survey" under the form of a card index of first settlers, or of settlers who lived in the county (or other area) prior to a fixed date, the procedure would be about as follows: (a) The local society should select from its membership those who have a special interest in tracing social origins, and permit each one of these to cover in his or her study such areas as may be preferred. Cards of uniform size and form for filing should be furnished to all workers, together with a minimum schedule of points to be covered in the inquiry. (b) The results might be presented in the form of reports to the society from time to time and, in any event, should be filed at a central place. Copies of local files might be made for the State Historical Society, which would thus become a clearing house, helpful to inquirers in all parts of the state.



There are men and women who have a deep interest in the study of social origins, an enticing subject in itself. One man known to the writer, working on the subject from pure love of it, is even now familiar with the stories of hundreds of pioneers of his county. This is but a single illustration. Such knowledge ought to be recorded and carefully preserved. It could be done best by local societies, but it will have to be done by some agency if our study of Wisconsin civilization is to be ideally complete. The State Historical Society invites conference with the local societies on this and other subjects of co-operative endeavor.

#### THE STUDY OF LOCAL PROGRESS

Either the persons who make the local social and physical surveys, or others, will employ the facts brought out by these surveys in pushing forward the study of local history. For practical purposes the history of a township in its development from pioneer days may be looked upon as a complex involving many special histories—and each of those special histories deserves separate treatment. It might be well if some writers would specialize on the history of agriculture in given townships, others on the history of manufactures, others on the history of education, others on the history of morals, and still others on the history of local politics, public improvements, religious organizations, etc. The advantage, we repeat, in studying general historical themes under local conditions is that in this way we are placing the historical process, in small sections, under the microscope and compelling it to yield up secrets not hitherto revealed. The local community becomes at the same time a laboratory for testing the validity of social principles and hypotheses not definitely established. The more complete one's training for historical research, the more perfect his equipment for the study of the "Great Society," the more ample should be his reward from the local study suggested.